

THE SPORTING SCENE

QUEEN OF THE D-LEAGUE

How does a woman coach a men's basketball team?

BY BEN McGRATH

"It's not easy looking good these days," Nancy Lieberman remarked, her hair in curlers, as she eyed herself in the mirror of a Dallas hair salon. Once known as Lady Magic, for her skills on the basketball court, Lieberman is now fifty-two, and comfortably beyond the tomboy phase that, back home in Queens, used to drive her mother to despair. While growing up, Lieberman idolized the Knicks stars Clyde Frazier and Willis Reed, and Muhammad Ali, whom she now considers a friend. (She calls him Muhammad.) She played tackle football with the neighborhood toughs, using a souvenir New York Jets lampshade for a helmet. She saved her paper-route money to buy a pair of Chuck Taylors, in defiance of the salesman, who told her, "It's not a shoe for girls." These days, she explained, "I tell people, 'Don't let my stilettos fool you. I still want to win.'"

Lieberman is the head coach of a minor-league basketball team called the Texas Legends, an affiliate of the Dallas Mavericks in the N.B.A.'s Development League, or D-League, as it is more often known, which typically plays to crowds of a few thousand in cities like Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Erie, Pennsylvania. Her charges are men, and as one of them, the captain, Antonio Daniels, told me recently, when they go out they inevitably get asked, "Oh, your coach is a girl? What's that like?" He paused a moment and shrugged. "What's it like? Same thing as if a guy was a coach, you know what I mean? Except you just don't undress in the locker room at the same time. And she's big on love, and she's big on hugs, and all that kind of stuff."

Chris Finch, the coach of the rival Rio Grande Valley Vipers, said, "I tell my players that I love their effort, but I wouldn't say that I love them."

"We're different," Lieberman acknowledged.

Lieberman was the first woman to play men's professional basketball. In

1986, she made ten thousand dollars as a backup point guard with the Springfield Fame, of the United States Basketball League, which played its games in the late spring, after the conclusion of the N.C.A.A. season and before the start of the N.B.A. summer leagues. She is not quite the first woman to be coaching men. In 2004, a twenty-two-year-old Vanderbilt graduate with no prior coaching experience, Ashley McElhiney, was put in charge of the Nashville Rhythm, an expansion team in the American Basketball Association, which is a kind of poor man's D-League. (The team folded a year later.) But Lieberman is the first crossover coach with plausible aspirations to being taken seriously at the highest level. After she was offered the position, in late 2009, she went on a yearlong listening tour, seeking advice from veteran N.B.A. coaches and other wise men. "I was like, 'Holy cow, what the hell are you all talking about?'" she recalled. Lieberman had coached for a few years in the W.N.B.A., in the late nineties, and then spent much of the intervening decade as an ESPN analyst, a job that consisted of explaining the game to a general audience. But in the pep talks with these would-be mentors she found the jargon impenetrable. It was as though the N.B.A. spoke its own language. "They're talking 'two-nine,' 'cleanse,' 'shake,' 'ice it,' 'bluc-blitz it,'" she said. "I knew I had to win that battle, so I had to educate myself on talking the talk."

She also had to find a way to connect with young, mostly African-American men. "I tell these guys we have more in common than you think," she said. "Young black men don't want to be profiled, and old white women don't want to be profiled."

Lieberman is five feet ten and broad in the shoulders, but she retains a girlish face in spite of the corporate look—slacks, pumps—that she favors on game nights. At the salon, which she has been visiting

with some regularity for the past ten years, she was wearing a sequined sweatsuit and sneakers; she had come straight from practice. Her hairdresser, Sherry Gilderoy, stood beside her. The curlers wrapping Lieberman's red hair added two or three inches to her height. "Sherry owns me from the neck up," Lieberman said. Gilderoy apprenticed under José Eber, "the Michael Jordan of hair stylists," as Lieberman put it.

An hour passed before the curlers could come off and the blow-drying and spraying could begin. Lieberman started to fidget. "A little pain, a little beauty," another stylist drawled. "That's what my grandma says."

"So we lose opening night to R.G.V.," Lieberman finally said, recounting the start of her debut season, last fall, against Coach Finch's Vipers, an affiliate of the Houston Rockets. "We go to Idaho, and we have two road games, and I'm thinking, I don't want to come back oh-and-three, because that's going to put a lot of questions on me and them. 'Does she know what she's doing?' Our first game at Idaho, we're down seven with about three minutes to go. You could just see this look of concern on Antonio's face. So I call him over—they're shooting a foul shot. I go, 'Antonio, come here.' Yes, coach? He doesn't know how I work. It's our second game together. I say, 'Antonio, look, this is serious. Do you like my hair?'"

Lieberman likes to say that she has a Rolodex as long as the North Dallas Tollway. Every morning, she sends out a text message to a distribution list of friends and sports-world dignitaries, from the Yankees manager, Joe Girardi, to the Mavericks coach, Rick Carlisle. "In reading the lives of great people," a recent one read, "I found that the first victory they ever won was over themselves." Most mornings, she gets a similar message in return from the former football and baseball player Deion Sanders: "The key ingredient 2a successful relationship isn't money, looks, or love. It's TRUST. 2bc trusted is a greater compliment than anything." Before a recent game, she told me that she'd spent the afternoon seeking advice from Kevin Costner about a movie idea involving her life story. "Kind of like 'The Blind Side,'" she said. "About overcoming all these challenges." Lieberman saw herself not as the Sandra Bullock

character—a wealthy Southern woman who adopts and mentors a poor black teen—but as something closer to Michael Oher, the adoptee, who is now a three-hundred-pound offensive lineman in the N.F.L.

Jerry Lieberman, Nancy's father, was a contractor, and he built the family home, on Bayswater Avenue, in Far Rockaway,

ered basketball at P.S. 104, a couple of blocks away, and she and her friends played late into the evenings; when it got dark, they relied on the sound of bouncing rubber and called it "radar ball."

As a teen-ager, Lieberman began riding the A and the E trains after school to Harlem—at first, to play for a girls' team called the New York Chuckles, and then

the guys were so good to me." Her first nickname, on account of her hair and her feisty temperament, was Fire.

In 1976, when she was eighteen, Lieberman became the youngest basketball player ever to win an Olympic medal. (The United States got the silver; the Soviet Union took the gold.) At Old Dominion University, in Virginia, she ac-



"I tell these guys we have more in common than you think," Nancy Lieberman says. Photograph by Jeff Minton.

as well as a house nearby for his parents; the two properties shared a large backyard that the local kids called Miniature Yankee Stadium. He moved out when Nancy was eight, and his absence—the loss of a male role model—usually marks the starting point in the capsule biography that she has honed in the retelling. There were unpaid electric bills. "We were one grandparent away from food stamps," she says. Her older brother, Cliff, was studious and not particularly interested in sports. (He later became a dentist.) Nancy, meanwhile, was a "hellion," as she puts it, and spent little time at home. She discov-

to compete against the boys who assembled for pickup games at Rucker Park, a proving ground for greats like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Dr. J., and Tiny Archibald. She wore extra layers of sweaters and stuffed T-shirts in the shoulders of her jacket to make herself look bigger and tougher. She was often the only white girl getting off at 155th Street. Fortunately, playground rules usually dictated that teams were frequently chosen through foul-shooting competitions, where she faced less of a physical disadvantage. "I get asked, you know, 'Tell me the horror stories,'" she says. "I don't have any, 'cause

quired more nicknames (SuperJew, Lieb the Heeb), and was also a three-time All-American and two-time national champion. After graduation, she moved to Texas to play for the Dallas Diamonds, of the fledgling Women's Professional Basketball League, a short-lived precursor to the W.N.B.A. Next came the U.S.B.L., the men's league, where she struggled to keep up, averaging about two points a game during her season with Springfield before being traded to the Long Island Knights. With some initial reluctance, she accepted an invitation to join the Harlem Globetrotters' tour in the fall of 1987,

playing for those perennial losers the Washington Generals and suppressing the constant urge to abandon the script and steal the ball during the famous three-man weave. "The guys on the Trotters were getting pretty old by that point," she says. "I think we had more talent on the Generals."

Lieberman's impatience with gender barriers extended into her personal life. In the early nineteen-eighties, she was romantically involved with Martina Navratilova, whom she worked for as a fitness coach. "We talked about the pro sport teams in Dallas, the playoffs, what so-and-so does on third-down-and-four when he calls an audible," Lieberman wrote, in her 1991 autobiography, "Lady Magic." "I had never had that kind of conversation with another female before." In the late eighties, she married and had a son with her Washington Generals teammate Tim Cline. (They have since divorced.)

By the time the W.N.B.A. was established, in 1997, Lieberman was thirty-nine and long since retired from playing anything other than pickup games at the gym in Dallas with guys like the former Slam Dunk Contest winner Spud Webb, now the Texas Legends' president of basketball operations, and the Utah Jazz star Karl Malone. Never one to pass up the chance for a reachable milestone, she signed a one-year contract with the Phoenix Mercury and became the oldest female professional, filling in off the bench.

The milestones are not insignificant, and may owe something to the grandiosity of Lieberman's choice of role models. "Rosa Parks—it took guts for her to say, 'I'm going to sit there,'" she told me. "It took guts, you know, for Martin Luther King, Jr., to say, 'This is what I'm going to do.'" She added, "When I was up at the White House with President Obama, last May, he just looked at me and he goes, 'Change is hard.' I'm like, 'Don't you know, President, dude, don't you know.'"

Shortly after moving to Dallas, Lieberman paid a voice coach two thousand dollars to help her lose the Queens accent. "I yoused tuh tawk like dis," she told me. "You know, Whatchou lookin' at? Now I'm sophisticated and refined." She still drives like a New Yorker, how-



ever, and on the way home from the hair salon she maneuvered her Bentley in and out of traffic, shifting lanes and tailgating and generally ignoring the automated warnings her radar detector was issuing about red-light cameras ahead. Her cell phone rang, and she answered, using an earpiece. It was her first boyfriend, Tommy Conrad, a former Old Dominion point guard who is now a scout for the Orlando Magic. "Are you looking for a scorer, a defender—who you looking for?" Lieberman asked, and then began talking up a couple of her Legends players, Antonio Daniels and Justin Dentmon, as well as "a kid who's really good, down at Austin, with the Toros, Squeaky Johnson. Anybody named Squeaky, you got to wonder. But I like his game."

Jameer Nelson, the Magic's starting point guard, had apparently hurt his knee, and the team was looking to sign a replacement player—a "Band-Aid," as Lieberman put it—to help it through the playoff stretch. "I get these calls from time to time," she said, after the call ended. "I could tell them, 'I don't really have anybody on my roster.' Like, 'we're done if we lose Antonio or Justin.'" The Legends were in the middle of a playoff race of their own, a half game out of the eighth and final spot, with three games to go in the regular season. "We need them," she went on. "But it wouldn't be fair, because I'm supposed to be their greatest promoter."

Therein lay the dilemma and the challenge of coaching in the D-League, where the ultimate goal is not winning per se but managing expectations and helping people move on to better things. The Legends' roster was a mixture of near-misses, dreamers, hangers-on, and guys who are "just thrilled to death that they're not playing in a rec league," as Lieberman said. It included the only Taiwanese-born player ever to be drafted by an N.B.A. team (a power forward named Joe Alexander), the oldest man ever to play in the D-League (Antonio Daniels, who is thirty-six), an N.B.A. washout and former boyfriend of Khloé Kardashian (Rashad McCants), and an ex-high-school standout from the Dallas area (Booker Woodfox) who worked last summer at Lieberman's basketball camp. Perhaps twenty per cent of the

players in the D-League can expect to see their names on the back of an N.B.A. jersey at some point. The other eighty per cent, Lieberman said, "we're coaching for life."

Daniels was an unusual case. He spent twelve years in the N.B.A., and won a championship with the San Antonio Spurs in 1999. He had reached that career stage where an athlete's sense of how much he has left to offer and the market's opinion are not aligned. "It's very humbling," he told me. "But I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. I feel like I'm back in college, to a certain degree. You know, the travelling, the hotels you stay in. When you have twelve years of the Four Seasons, and then you go to the Holiday Inn, it's a big difference. Having to take a commercial plane at five o'clock in the morning, as opposed to being able to fly out on a private plane out of your own hangar—it's a big difference. But to see some of these guys, and how hungry they are to get there . . . I believe in paying it forward."

At least they get to fly. "Back in the day, in the eighties, it was really buses and off-the-side-of-the-road hotels," Lieberman told me, recalling her own playing experience, and deeming her guys fortunate by comparison. "The D-League, we're at casinos!" The Legends took buses only for games in Austin and Tulsa, and Lieberman often found herself negotiating with airline ticket agents for special favors. "Oh, my gosh, you have never seen these guys cramped up like on some of these commuter flights," she said. "I'm like, 'Please, can you help my guys? I've got six-ten, six-eight, seven-four. I need exit rows. I need aisles. I need whatever you can get.'" One Delta employee was so accommodating that Lieberman gave her free tickets to a game.

Another time, at a morning coaches' meeting, I watched Lieberman phone in a sandwich order for an upcoming bus trip. "I like that I'm part coach, part mom," she said. "No job is too small. If our guys are sick, I'll go get 'em some soup and bring it to them."

Justin Dentmon wasn't sick, but Lieberman had promised to cook him crab cakes, and so, on a scheduled day off last month, Dentmon arrived at her house, in an unfinished luxury subdivision that backs up to the water tower in Plano, to

call in the favor. "I bet Phil Jackson doesn't do this for Kobe," Lieberman said. Dentmon was accompanied by Jackie Fisher, the team's trainer—"and shrink and valet and masseuse and laundress," according to Lieberman. It was March Madness time, and Lieberman suggested that they try to find some games on TV while she attended to the stove. "Ain't no games today," Dentmon replied. "Just women's games."

"Did you say 'just'?" she asked. "Did you use the word 'just' women's games?" "Yeah, just women's games," he said, cracking a smile.

Dentmon, who is from Illinois, was a four-year starter at the University of Washington, as a guard, but went undrafted and played last season in Israel, for a club named Hapoel in the small northern city of Afula, near the West Bank. He led the Israeli league in scoring, and was impressed by the level of fan interest ("It was always packed"), but he characterized the over-all experience as mixed. "What did my people do to you?" Lieberman teased. (She and her mother will be visiting Israel next month.)

"They didn't pay me on time," he said.

Lieberman's son, T.J., who is sixteen and already six feet six, returned home from playing pickup basketball with some friends, and joined Dentmon and Fisher in expressing disappointment that there were tomatoes in the salad. Lieberman said grace, and T.J. began bombarding Dentmon with questions about playing in college and overseas versus in the D-League.

"So why'd you come here?" T.J. asked.

"Wanted to see if I could go to the N.B.A.," Dentmon said. "You ain't never heard of me before I got here."

"Who can jump the highest on the team?"

Dentmon, who is six feet, suggested that he could. T.J. was skeptical. "All you need to do is YouTube me," Dentmon said.

After dinner, Lieberman grabbed a scrap of paper and began diagramming a new play that she'd seen while watching a Mavericks game the night before. "I would like to run this with you and Booker," she told Dentmon. "It's a great play, because they're going to be expecting that we're going to run the stagger, and that's going to be a great little counter."

"You're right," Dentmon said. "Quick hitter."

At one point, T.J. remarked, "Can you believe Antoine Walker is playing in the D-League?" Walker, a three-time All-Star with the Boston Celtics, had filed for bankruptcy after retiring and then contemplated resuming his career in Europe before signing with the Idaho Stampede, last December.

"How do you go through a hundred million?" Lieberman asked. "And he's only thirty-four."

"Probably 'cause he thought the money would keep coming, so he was like, 'I'm going to spend, spend, 'cause I know it's going to be there,'" Dentmon said.

"Justin, you should do that," T.J. said.

"Justin will be putting his money away," Lieberman said, to which Dentmon assented.

First, of course, Dentmon has to make some money. D-League salaries range from fifteen thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars a season. Then, there was the matter of the looming N.B.A. lockout, and what effect, if any, it might have on the pipeline. "I heard from some other coaches that they could increase the salary in the D-League to try to keep guys from going overseas," Lieberman said.

Dentmon shook his head, and said, "It's crazy that you've got to go overseas to

get more money than in your own country." Before leaving, he turned to T.J. and reminded him to check out some YouTube highlights. "You'll see me dunk on six-eight, six-nine guys," he said.

Three years ago, Lieberman came out of retirement again and played nine minutes for the W.N.B.A.'s Detroit Shock in a late-season game against the Houston Comets. She was fifty at the time, breaking by more than a decade her own record as the league's oldest player. ("I wanted T.J. to see what his mommy did," she told me.) She turned the ball over twice and registered two assists. Her knees no longer permit the kind of aggressive running and jumping that competitive sports require, but she hasn't lost her shooting touch. Before a recent practice, Lieberman was challenged by the Legends center Matthew Rogers to a game of H-O-R-S-E. Within a couple of minutes, she was ahead by two letters. Rogers, who is nearly seven feet tall, resorted to feats of acrobatics and strength, at one point hurling the ball against the gymnasium wall, jumping, catching the ricochet in midair, and dunking, as though in an alley-oop. Lieberman's throw didn't have enough force, and bounced once before she could retrieve it and convert a layup. "See, I can't do trick shots with her, 'cause she never does 'em



right,” Rogers complained, to no one in particular. Within the constraints of the possible, Lieberman was more consistent, however. “I’ll keep winning as long as they keep playing me,” she boasted, after finishing him off.

Lieberman ran a relatively subdued practice, without the punitive conditioning drills or the temper tantrums that you might associate with, say, Bobby Knight—another pal in the Rolodex. (“We’re trying not to F-bomb our players and raise our voices,” she’d warned me, of her style.) She introduced the new play that she’d diagrammed for Dentmon the day before, and oversaw a series of drills and controlled scrimmages that were aimed at improving defensive coverage. She occasionally interrupted the drills to demonstrate. After forty-seven games, and twenty-two wins, the Legends were the league’s third-highest-scoring team but were also tied for the most points allowed. Earlier in the week, Lieberman had cold-called Tom Thibodeau, the head coach of the Chicago Bulls, and asked for help with her defense. He FedExed her a portion of the Bulls’ playbook. “It’s a fraternity, and I’m just glad the guys have allowed me to be in the fraternity,” she said. “I bet you it’s been ninety to ten, men to women, calling to congratulate me. ‘What do you need? How can we help you?’ Because women, we still have a little bit of, I think, that jealousy, or the pie’s been so small in the past that we’re petty in some cases.”

Spud Webb, who appears no longer to be in dunking shape, looked on from the sideline and recalled a conversation he’d had back in 2009 with Donnie Nelson, the general manager of the Mavericks and the Legends’ owner, about the vacant coaching position. “You know me, I’m a former player,” Webb said. “I’m like, ‘I got this guy, this guy, this guy.’ He goes, ‘Whatchou think about Nancy?’” Webb feigned an expression of surprise. “I been knowing Nancy for twenty-seven years. Donnie’s like, ‘I think she’d be great for us. She’s the whole works—personality, everything.’” Webb and Lieberman went out to a restaurant soon afterward to discuss the idea. “You really want to coach men?” he said. “You want to leave your job at ESPN to do this?”

Watching the practice, Webb marvelled at how much attitudes had changed

since his own playing days, when, he said, he and his teammates could never have imagined a female boss. “You see how organized she is,” he said. “I mean, she’s respected. You’ll see a guy disagree here and there, and she’ll tell him, ‘This is my philosophy. This is the way we want to do it.’ And that’s what a coach should do.”

Before sending the guys off to the showers, Lieberman reminded them that the team bus would be leaving immediately after the next night’s game, for a three-day road trip to Austin. “O.K., look, so I’m pretty hard-line on this,” she said. “Don’t show up at the arena telling me you don’t have your socks, or your jock, or your headphones, or your—”

“We don’t wear jocks,” one player interrupted.

“She thinks we wear jocks,” another snickered.

When she was in her late twenties, Lieberman starred in a rarely seen movie, “Perfect Profile.” Its premise was that a computer whiz had taken over the Dallas Mavericks and come up with a formula for scouting the ideal basketball player, whose name turns out to be Terry Williams. The owner dispatches his aides to sign this Williams character to a multimillion-dollar contract, only to discover that the presumed “he” is in fact a “she,” played by Lieberman. Despite strong resistance from the team’s traditionalist coach, Williams is given a uniform, and helps the Mavericks defeat the Lakers in the championship.

Unlike the Mavericks, the Legends play their home games at the Dr Pepper Arena, a forty-five-hundred-seat venue in the town of Frisco, one of those North Dallas suburbs which have mushroomed in the past generation. They share the building with a Junior-A hockey team, the Texas Tornado, and the Dallas Stars, of the N.H.L., who use it as a practice facility. Standing at courtside during warmups before the Legends’ final home game of the season, Lieberman mentioned that she’d just got a call from an ESPN reporter who wondered, in effect, whether “Perfect Profile” could ever come true—whether, five or ten years down the line, we might see a woman playing in the N.B.A.

“Heck no!” she said, and brought up the University of Connecticut senior Maya Moore, a three-time Wade Tro-

phy winner as the N.C.A.A. player of the year. “Maya Moore’s amazing, but she couldn’t play in *this* league. The guys are too big and too fast and too strong.” She also mentioned that she’d just got her nails done.

A high-school band was practicing “Louie, Louie.” A couple of players on the opposing team, the Springfield Armor, trotted by to say hello. Justin Dentmon looked over and gestured to the side of his head, causing Lieberman to fix her hair.

The Legends got off to a fast start, and weren’t turning the ball over as much as they had been earlier in the season. (“We were like 501(c)(3)s,” Lieberman joked to me once. “We were very philanthropic.”) D-League games are typically high-scoring affairs—the Legends, for instance, scored sixty-eight points in the first half—but that, evidently, is not enough to hold fans’ interest. The Top 40 soundtrack seldom let up, even during play. A giant rock-climbing wall behind one of the baskets attracted restless spectators. During a stoppage in the third quarter, the owner, Donnie Nelson, got up and joined a color guard in a dance to “Whoomp! (There It Is),” waving a Mavericks sweatshirt around above his head. “You won’t see that in the N.B.A.,” one of the team’s radio announcers remarked, off air. At the conclusion of the game (Legends 132, Armor 112), the public-address announcer invited everyone down onto the court to participate in an enormous team-and-community photo op.

A few nights later, in Austin, the Legends qualified for the playoffs with a thrilling double-overtime comeback win. Then, the following morning, they learned that the Philadelphia 76ers, having lost one of their guards to a hamstring injury, were interested in signing Antonio Daniels to a ten-day contract. Lieberman tweeted, “No greater feeling in the D-League than to have that conversation with ur guy and tell him he has gone to the show!” Without Daniels to run the point, however, the Legends sputtered in the opening round, against Tulsa. They were done. Lieberman’s contract is up for renewal, but, with another milestone behind her, she hasn’t disclosed whether she plans to return or what her next career move might be. By last week, she had settled naturally into the off-season jock routine of hitting the links and working on her short game. ♦